

## МУЗЫКА

UDC 439.78;441.782;442.783

*Marina Ritzarev*

### FROM THE CATHEDRAL TO THE OPERA STAGE

Department of Music Bar-Ilan University  
Ramat-Gan 5290002 Israel

The article focuses on the historical coincidence: two operas based on the Gospel plot had their premieres under two different cultural milieu but very close in time: the rock-opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice (1971, Broadway, New York) and the Russian avant-garde chamber opera *Master i Margarita* by Sergei Slonimsky (1972, Leningrad, concert performance), after M. Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*. The article examines the cultural and historical conditions that preceded these operas so different in their styles, audiences, and fates.

**Keywords:** Jesus Christ Superstar, Andrew Lloyd Webber, The Master and Margarita, Sergei Slonimsky, Mikhail Bulgakov, Gospel, passion play, opera, rock-opera, passion-opera, Christology, myth, Pathos, Ethos.

To the blessed memory of my friend Vladimir Marel

The year 1971 witnessed the Broadway production of the rock-opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. Its worldwide success, preceded by two years of increasing popularity of *Superstar* single and *JCS* album, is well known.

The same year, and on Broadway too, saw the successful staging of *Godspell*, with music and lyrics by Stephan Schwartz. The show was created as a clown revue with “contemporary Christian” folk and folk-rock music [1, p. 291]<sup>1</sup>.

On April 10, 1972, at the Leningrad House of the Soviet Composers' Union, an informal presentation of the first part of the chamber avant-garde opera by Sergei Slonimsky after Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* (libretto by Jury Dimitrin and Vitaly Fialkovsky) was conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky.

These three productions differed in genre, music style, socio-cultural context of the work, general idea, images of Christ and other characters, target audience, relations with censorship, and the fate of the work. There are three main shared points, however: they all brought Jesus Christ onto the scene of the musical theater at about the same time and for the first time in history. That which had been, till then, the genre of Passion Play, transgressed its own boundaries and entered the realm of opera. The present essay proposes a discussion: Was it indeed only a coincidence; or were there three differing responses to the same quest in cultural history, and eventually the birth of a new, hybrid genre?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Godspell* is subtitled as “A Musical Based on the Gospel according to St Matthew”. The plot presents a group of 1973 New York young people who, by divine inspiration, get together, dress and behave like clowns, and present the Gospel as a group of circus clowns.

<sup>2</sup> The question of whether simultaneous appearing of Slonimsky's and Lloyd Webber's operas was coincidental or not, intrigued me from the late 1980s when I worked on my monography on Sergei Slonimsky

Conceived around 1970, they are rooted in the 1960s and their postmodern experimentations in all the fine arts. The theme of Jesus Christ also went through some remarkable breakthroughs, resonating in various ways in the general public awareness. Certain events that occurred in the mid-1960s, thus, need to be considered in order to trace the immediate stimuli which brought this topic to the theater stage.

### Back to the 1960s

To begin with cinema, by then dealing with this theme for half a century, it revealed a sudden and dramatic increase. The four-decade period between 1916–1954 had seen seven Gospel-related films. Then a new wave started with the 1959 production of *Ben-Hur* and followed with six new films within the four-year period of 1961–1965: *King of Kings* (1961, Nickolas Ray), *Pontius Pilate* (1961, Gian Paolo Callegari and Irving Rapper), *Barabbas* (1961, Richard Fleischer), *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964, Pier Paolo Pasolini), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965, George Stevens), and *The Redeemer* (1965, Joseph Breen) [2, p. 44–49].

The avant-garde did not stall; the year 1966 witnessed Krzysztof Penderecki's *Passio et mors domini nostri Jesu Christi, secundum Lucam* (St Luke Passion). Its greatly publicized premiere in Münster Cathedral turned out to be an event of international significance, involving the presence of Catholic VIPs and the West German Broadcast Service, holding a press conference attended by journalists from all over the world. The surrounding atmosphere well suited the novelty of the musical expression, the length of the work and the huge number of performers. The event also somewhat responded to Pier Paolo Pasolini's "documentary" *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964) which used not only the music of Bach and Mozart, but also of Prokofiev and Webern. An important link had been created between Jesus Christ and the musical avant-garde.

In the same year, 1966, John Lennon, in his challenging manner, dropped the remark that the Beatles "were now more popular than Christ" in a Maureen Cleave interview for the *Evening Standard*. Quoted out of context before the Beatles' last American tour, the comment created a furor [4, p.236]. Through this, another association was established, now between Jesus Christ and the rock-music world. This was well supported by the Beatlemania atmosphere, mass psychosis and hysteria that turned their (and later other rock-stars') concerts into a quasi-Mystery Play, almost-touching-the-live-Messiah experience, which was to become an indispensable attribute of the rock-culture. It endowed a singer-songwriter with the stature of a quasi 'apostle,' bringing the image of God closer to that of a human global folk hero. "In an apotheosis of democracy, the Beatles were deified for their extraordinary ordinariness" [5, p.192]. In this context it is relevant to remember the celebration of Christ in various genres of popular music coming from different ends: Mahalia Jackson's black gospels, Odetta singing "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" an African-American Spiritual in above-mentioned Pasolini's film; Beatles' songs like *My sweet Lord*, *Awaiting on you all* and *Hear me Lord* and the French pop vocal group "Swingle Singers" linking Bach, whose only name draws connotations to Christian topic, with jazz.

---

[2, p. 131]. Later, in 2002, I delivered a paper at the XVII Congress of IMS, and the idea continued to mature. The present article is a fundamentally revised and updated version. My thanks to Esti Sheinberg for her valuable suggestions and to the board of the *Vestnik of St Petersburg State University* for interest to this idea.

© Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, 2017

In the winter of 1966–1967, in another part of the world, the widest circles of the Russian intelligentsia exploded with truly pathetic excitement, caused by the publication of the abbreviated version of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. This double-plot “novel within a novel” is one of the twentieth-century's richest in literary generic sources masterpieces, known also for its virtuosic play between myth and ‘reality.’ With all its sophistication, however, the novel unambiguously recycles the myth of Jesus. On one level, the ancient myth is ‘written’ by the Master as a historical novel on Pontius Pilate. On the second level, the action unfolds in Moscow of the 1930's. Multitemporality is reversed, however<sup>3</sup>. The story of Yeshua is retold with an illusionary presentation of here-and-now action, while the events of contemporaneous Moscow, on the contrary, are painted in fantastic colors: most of the characters are given symbolic names (referring rather to criminal-world monikers, including Azazello, Italianized form of *Azazel* meaning *hell* in Hebrew, and Behemoth, in various religious traditions symbolizing monster, demon and evil serving in Satan's entourage). The Master himself has no first name. This inversion in perception of ‘then’ in relation to ‘now’ and ‘now’ in relation to ‘then’ creates a complex counterpoint and ensures that the reader would identify Master with Jesus in one way or another. As for the protagonist of the Master's novel, in the era of Stalin, Bulgakov did not need to invent an allusion to Pilate. It was transparent: a functionary in totalitarian society, managing culture and arts with the help of ideology and party interests, sentences an innocent man to death and is doomed to an eternal torment of consciousness.

The English edition of the novel appeared immediately, translated by Michael Glenny (London: Harvill, 1967). The newly discovered masterpiece created strong waves in the reading world, despite the existence of already well-developed passion-play literature, including Pär Lagerkvist's Nobel Prize winning novel *Barabbas* (1950, screened in 1961). The highly remarkable extra-textual circumstance of Bulgakov's novel's posthumous publication, surviving one of the most horrible periods in human history, was a direct illustration of its message of immortality. Not only *manuscripts do not burn*, but every deed is immortal. The afterlife exists, and it does not exonerate one from the sins of this life.

### Bulgakov and Christology

Among the books that Bulgakov read while crystallizing his conception of the novel was *The Life of Jesus* (*Das Leben Jesu*, 1835) by the German theologian David Strauss (1808–1874) [6, p.232]. This book is known as the first nineteenth-century attempt to separate the myth of Jesus from Christianity. Strauss' research followed his studies at Berlin University in 1831–1832. It could be useful to juxtapose the date of his book's publication with another and earlier Berlin event of 1829 — the discovery and performance of J.S.Bach's *St Matthew Passion* conducted by the twenty years old Felix Mendelssohn. From then on, Bach's masterpiece was performed annually in Berlin, a tradition eventually spread to other German towns, too. This performance could hardly have passed unnoticed by Strauss. And it would probably be fair to assume that it influenced the young German theologian and philosopher, with Bach's music offering an utterly human image

---

<sup>3</sup> In a coincidence very appropriate for the present discussion, multitemporality is also characteristic to J.S.Bach-Picander *St Matthew Passion*.

of Jesus. Indeed, Bach-Picander's *Passion* (1727), reproachfully called "the Fifth Gospel"<sup>4</sup>, probably because Christ image was more humanized than the religious doctrine could tolerate, had a great impact on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century arts focusing on the figure of Jesus. To expand this speculation: the revival of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* during the upswing of Romanticism could have been one of the stimulating factors leading to the establishment of modern Christology.

The next crucial milestone in the development of religious rationalism and historicization of Jesus' image in modern Christology generally was Ernest Renan's book *La vie de Jésus* (1863). Following but also diverting from David Strauss, Renan drew the most vivid story of Jesus' life. Renan's impact on the arts was enormous. Painters, both West-European and their Russian counterparts, created a vast number of Gospel canvases, sometimes using Jesus' image as a metaphor to signal social protest. Prince Myshkin from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1968–1969) was perhaps the first literary protagonist featuring Jesus' image, though in an allusive way. But there were more noticeable works on way to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. The image and philosophy of Jesus and the very Ethos of Christianity were central topics in Russian religious philosophy. Dmitry Merezhkovsky, for example, worked on these questions for decades, his work culminating in *Jesus the Unknown* (1932) and *Jesus Manifest* (1935). Russian religious-philosophical thought, however, was surpassed in quantity by Western writers searching for historical Jesus: "By late 19th century, hundreds of *Lives of Jesus* were written" [8]. Jesus' biography, preaching, philosophy, behavior, political strategy, historical mission, psychology, mythology — all were subject to various interpretations, doomed to remain such, for the lack of new factual material. Attempts to harmonize versions of the Gospel brought little result. This first wave of fin-de-siècle Christology was concluded by Albert Schweitzer in his book originally titled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (1906)<sup>5</sup>.

Christology was just one of the many parallels between German and Russian cultural processes, from the 18<sup>th</sup> until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the *Ecce Homo* painting by the German artist Lovis Corinth (1858–1925) depicts three figures: Jesus in the center, Mark the Centurion (nicknamed 'The Ratslayer') on the right and some less conspicuous Gospel figure on the left. While the suffering Jesus, with long hair and dressed with a kind of traditional Greek *chiton* and having long hair, obviously refers to classic painting, both the Centurion and the figure on the left undoubtedly carry a 20<sup>th</sup>-century appearance. The Ratslayer, with his clearly Lombrosian face, wears some military uniform combining features of a Roman Centurion and a contemporary military officer (resulting in a look characteristic to fantasy films, often associated with extraterrestrial aggressors). The man on the left, with the mixed expression of compassion, concern and distraction, wears something reminding of a hospital gown of a murky-white color. Is he Matthew Levi, John the Homeless, Doctor Stravinsky running the psychiatric clinic? Or, maybe, the Master himself, hospitalized in the madhouse?

The painting looks like a very powerful illustration for Bulgakov's novel. The only impediment would be the date of its creation: 1925, three years before Bulgakov's first conception of *Master and Margarita*. Could it be, then, that Bulgakov was inspired by

<sup>4</sup> The label, with its negative connotation, was coined by a Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom (1920) [7, p. 112–13].

<sup>5</sup> English translation by W. Montgomery published in Great Britain, 1910.

this painting? Such a striking resemblance of types makes it very difficult to believe in coincidence and creative processes independent of each other. Could it be possible to find a cultural path through which this artistic idea could reach Bulgakov? This is certainly a challenging task, which still awaits a serious attempt. Another, less striking but still intriguing detail (noted by Siglind Bruhn [9]) is a title of Max Brod's novel about the historical Jewish Jesus (Yeshua): *Der Meister*. Published in 1951, well after Bulgakov's novel had been finished (but not yet published!), Brod's novel coincides with that of Bulgakov in the very appellation. Sealed hermetically, the manuscript of *Master i Margarita* could hardly serve Brod with an idea to borrow. At least from Bulgakov. Brod also used the word differently, meaning more a religious teacher than an artistic 'maestro'. Still, could it be that some other/s, today less known source/s were behind all these three works?

Another interpretation of this stunning cultural phenomenon could be that both Corinth and Bulgakov responded to the rising totalitarianism in a similar manner. While formally two totalitarian societies were shaped in the 1930s, the fascist ideology permeated European societies for quite a long time, and Nazi parties were founded in Italy and Germany as early as 1920. The year 1925 of Corinth's *Ecce Homo* could perhaps be triggered by *The City without Jews* by Hugo Bettauer (*Die Stadt ohne Juden*, 1922) followed by the eponymous film by H. K. Breslauer, in 1924. Moreover, whether by a pure coincidence or a chain of events, another prophetic novel, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurenito and His Disciples* by Ilya Ehrenburg was published in 1922, too. Written in Russian during his stay in Brussels (and translated to German in 1923), Ehrenburg's novel predicted the entire macabre package of the coming decades: German fascism and Jewish Holocaust, Soviet totalitarianism and even the bombing of Hiroshima. Remarkably, the novel even features parodic reference to the Gospels. The novel was popular among the Russian intelligentsia, and it is known that Bulgakov read it, too. Further, considering his work for the Berlin newspaper in the Russian language, *Nakanune*, during 1922–1924 and the intense international networking of Russian artists until the late 1920s, Bulgakov could easily be aware of ongoing cultural events in Germany. Although the prophetic nature of both *The City without Jews* and *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurenito and His Disciples* was not known then, and their plots were presented rather as a satirical dystopia, such minds as Corinth and Bulgakov could see deeper than the general public and imagine the horrors of upcoming totalitarianism.

Christology faded during the WWII, but it revitalized following the historical findings of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran Caves' Scrolls) in the late 1940s. The 1950s–1960s presented the so-called Second Quest for the historical Jesus, also characterized by a variety of views and approaches. No wonder that a vast number of books published on the subject created a climate that called for artistic responses, which could explain the above-mentioned row of films beginning with *Ben Hur*, 1959. The date remarkably coincides with James M. Robinson's book *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press) reprinted 62 times during the 1960s only.

Although the publication of Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* on the crest of this wave posed for a commercial advantage, its message of ethical dissent remained relevant mostly for Russians and for Germans. At least two German composers — Rainer Kunad from the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and York Höller, from West Germany, wrote operas, both titled *Der Meister und Margarita* (Kunad in 1983 and Höller in 1984–1989).



It can be assumed that the influence of Bulgakov's novel on late 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists and literati can be compared to the perception of Jesus by many readers of Ernest Renan's book by the late nineteenth century. Still, a quest for a historical Jesus, to which both Renan and Bulgakov responded so powerfully, was not mandatory; artists and thinkers were free to interpret the figure of Jesus as a public icon with no special pretensions for a historical 'truth' [10, p. 313–350]. However, many artists — in cinema, music, opera, painting, and literature — chose to react in precisely this 'documentary' trend.

### The myth and the epoch

Thus, the Christ story regained popularity in post-modern times. Post WWII thought tended toward rationalism and classic 'belief in Reason'. The Jesus' myth, when included in a discourse, would tend toward a romanticized figure of the God, thus clearly separating 'myth' from 'reality'.

Every myth is a story, but not every story becomes a myth. A myth is an immortal story, for its key intrigue remains universal. The historical life of each myth has its periods of resurgence and respite, usually caused by powerful socio-cultural shifts in the public awareness. Curt Sachs [11] compellingly showed how the pendulum of history shapes contrasting epochs of Ethos, with its belief in reason, harmony, proportions, perfection, moderation and balance, and Pathos, with its tendency to irrationality, passion, freedom and exaggeration. The recurring ups-and-downs of the Christ myth parallel the crises of rationalism. We find this in the Baroque following the Renaissance, in Romanticism following Classicism. For example, Bach's *St Matthew Passion* appeared on the apex of the Baroque, and it is perhaps not by chance that such an explicit Romantic as Mendelssohn insisted on undertaking that performance, perceiving it as harmonious with his time. It is also apparent in the neo-Romanticism of the 1960–1980s that followed the neoclassicism of the 1920–1950s.

The second half of the twentieth century can be perceived as a transitional period from Ethos to Pathos. Generations grown up on Ethos values naturally continue to maintain them, even when realizing that the gap between them and the new generation, tending to Pathos, is widening.

"Any drama student could tell you, it's not the greatest story ever told. Why? Because the protagonist, Jesus, doesn't grow, develop, change, earn wisdom through experience", wrote Richard Corliss in 1988, summarizing his interview with Martin Scorsese, the director of *The Last Temptation of Christ* [12, p. 41]. Relying exclusively on a rationalistic criterion, one could easily agree with this comment; on the other hand, such agreement would ignore the irrationality criterion, which is so relevant in this case. The Jesus myth appeared in a time when neither the judicious official Rabbinical Judaism nor the sagacious Roman Paganism, borrowed from Classical Greece, could reconcile the people with current phenomena of mass suffering<sup>6</sup> and social uncertainty, leading to a period governed by apocalyptic eschatology. Where there was nothing in life to achieve or believe, Myth gave Jesus Christ irrational *resurrection* rather than the more rational idea of *rebirth*, necessary for pagan initiation rites [14, p. 29–23]. To "grow, develop, change, earn wisdom through experience" [12, p. 41] means to go through an initiation process that leads to

---

<sup>6</sup> As John Bowker states, suffering and humility with this experience are the main points of every religion [13, p. 2]. Hence, a mass suffering, to which an existing religion cannot respond, presents ground for emergence of a new religion.

a return from seeing death in the Other World to This World and to build one's life on earth — precisely Nikos Kazantzakis' last temptation of Christ as viewed in 1955.

The Christ myth, however, does not interpret the story of Jesus as an initiation to *life*, but to an *afterlife*, which was the only remaining value in which it was possible to believe in the epoch of apocalyptic eschatology.

Love is irrational. When one cannot fight against an offender, it might help, instead, to love one's enemy and 'turn the other cheek'. Loving the hated, however, is an irrational oxymoron for which Christianity has not offered a feasible solution as yet. When it will, the world will surely become a better place. Meanwhile, however, although one may criticize an irrational way to salvation, there is not rational alternative. Various forms of religious life coexist in their anachronism [15, p. 14].

After the Aristotelian rational culture heroes who inhabited Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) with egocentric objectivism, the appearance of Jesus as an antidotal, altruistic and suffering ethical model during the peak of the rock-romantic wave coinciding with the crisis of Vietnam War generation with its 'make love, not war!' slogan, could only be expected. Lloyd Webber-Rice's *Jesus Christ Superstar* was a hit not only as a brilliant musical/textual composition, but also as a presentation of the right topic at the right time [16, p. 62–66].

Bulgakov's Yeshua in *The Master and Margarita* reappeared (clandestinely) in 1928–1940. This period had neither Baroque nor Romanticist references. Although the period of the 1920–1930s allegedly represented a triumph of Ethos in classicistic, futuristic, constructivist and formalistic spirit of Soviet Russia, in fact, there was a clear eschatological atmosphere during the post-WWI revolution and following Civil War, leading to Stalin's Russia. There seemed — and for too many people not only seemed — to be no return from the Other World of horror and suffering. The forced rest of the novel's manuscript, however, ended at the right time — during a neo-Romanticist period, in a constellation somewhat resembling the Bach's *St Matthew Passion* Romanticist revival, a century after its original creation. Concerning Slonimsky musical interpretation of Bulgakov's work, though, such a statement is more problematic. Despite the great merits of this opera and the good timing of its premiere, the totalitarian bureaucracy nevertheless blocked people from enjoying their own contemporary art.

### Slonimsky and his *The Master and Margarita*

The 1972 unofficial performance of the First Part of Slonimsky's opera attracted such a mass of Leningrad's avant-garde lovers, Bulgakov's devotees and Slonimsky's admirers, that the Hertzen (today Bol'shaya Morskaya) Street, where the House of Composers is located, had a two-block queue in both directions. The performance was recorded for the radio. The following day, early in the morning, the radio technician made a copy for the composer. At nine o'clock, a telephone call from the Leningrad Party Committee reached the radio office banning the tape. An urgent meeting of the Theater Section of the Composers' Union was assembled at the directive of the Party, called to criticize the work. The point of condemnation was not the musical devices, like micro-tones, aleatoric fragments, twelve-tone techniques and so on, as it might have been a decade earlier, but of an ideological kind: the composer had identified himself with the main character, the Master, which had no grounds in the Soviet reality. Four composers: Boris Arapov, Israel Finkelshtein,

Lucian Prigozhin and Iosif Pustynnik from the older generation, who supported the opera for its artistic value, were discouraged in one way or another. Slonimsky was seriously reprimanded at the Leningrad Conservatory where he held a professorship. His moral rights to tutor students were put into question<sup>7</sup>.

However, this was 1972 and not 1936 (when Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* was most severely condemned and rejected, being rehabilitated with some textual and musical modifications only in 1963). Bulgakov's novel was not banned following its publication. Moreover, its full text was eventually published in Moscow in 1973. The novel was successfully adapted for the stage by Jury Lyubimov at the Moscow Taganka Theater (with music by Edison Denisov). Sergei Slonimsky, at a highpoint of his career with his successful opera *Virinea* (1967) and ballet *Icarus* (1971), both staged in Leningrad and Moscow, was an obvious vulnerable target for competing functionaries. The scandal and subsequent ban of his opera, a masterpiece whose historical significance as a remarkable milestone in twentieth-century Russian music is yet to be asserted, were more of a guild's intrigue than an ideological suppression, albeit presented under such a guise. After the scandal, the score of Slonimsky's *Master i Margarita* rested in a remote corner of his apartment for *eighteen years* (one of the longest prohibitions of the Soviet era), together with the authorized typescript collection of Joseph Brodsky's poems, a gift from an exiled friend (during the 1970s, the fear of KGB searches among the creative intelligentsia were still very much alive.)

Slonimsky's opera was eventually staged in 1989, well into the *glasnost*' years, thus emulating the process that eventually led to the posthumous publication of Bulgakov's novel and other twentieth-century Russian classic masterpieces. The production was a concert performance, conducted by Michael Jurowsky for two nights in Moscow's Tchaikovsky hall and two nights in Leningrad, at the Grand Philharmonic Hall, all sold to full capacity. No recording was made. However, the score was published in 1991, marking the centenary of Bulgakov's birth.

Were it not originally banned, Slonimsky's version of *The Master and Margarita* would surely have been a great success in its first — alas, missed — 1972 round. The composer, however, strongly believed in the immortality of honest art and noble human spirit. A thorough analysis of his works reveals an interesting leitmotif. A certain, quite abstract, chromatic series, whose sounds move away from the center up and down, first featured in his Sonata for violin solo, in memory of Jury Balkashin (1959) and later in some of his instrumental works, including the ballet *Icarus*. Only after this series acquired a verbal expression in *Master i Margarita* as the leitmotif associated with thoughts on immortality pronounced by the Master and Yeshua (characterized by similar music), as well as the leitmotif of Pontius Pilate's qualms of conscience, the theme ceased to haunt Slonimsky. It is worth noting that its first four notes, quite similar in the outline to J. S. Bach's motto *BACH* (and Shostakovich's motto *DEsCH*<sup>8</sup> form a rhetorical figure of the cross, while its further unfolding resembles Kyrie fugue subject from J. S. Bach's Mass in B minor: B<sup>3</sup>, C<sup>4</sup>, D flat<sup>4</sup>, B flat<sup>3</sup>, A<sup>3</sup>, D<sup>4</sup>, E flat<sup>4</sup>, E natural<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> The circumstances surrounding the premiere are described here based on interviews with Sergei Slonimsky during my work on his biography in 1987, St. Petersburg. See [2, p. 119–120] and also [17].

<sup>8</sup> D. Sch. — composer's initials in German spelling; in German musical notation *D*, *Es*, *C*, *H*, which is *D*, *E flat*, *C*, *B natural*.



## Passion Play or opera?

The history of the Passion-Play as a genre, born around the Fourth century, reflects a plurality of forms rather than a linear evolution. From the very beginning, the Passion Play was both part of the musical liturgy and a para-liturgical theatrical act. Played outside the church, a Passion Play would often incorporate urban music, known in Europe at least since Medieval minstrelsy. Germany maintained the genre of Passion Plays consistently, up to this day. The Oberammergau Passion Play goes now once in a decade, but it became almost an ethnic tradition. With the development of opera as urban entertainment, operatic features persistently influenced all the spiritual musical genres, including Passion Play. During the late Baroque the Passion was conjoined with the Oratorio, creating the category to which Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in fact belongs. typically to eighteenth-century oratorios it includes quite a few operatic features.

Following the line of Bach-Picander human image of Christ, in 1755, Anna Amalia, Princess of Prussia, commissioned C. H. Graun to write *Der Tod Jesu* (The Death of Jesus) on a text by K. W. Ramler, which presented the story in a free literary form, detached from the Gospel and was enriched by a simplified *gallant* music style that contributed to its special popularity. The idea was picked up by Giovanni Paisiello who composed *Passione di Gesù Cristo* (libretto by Metastasio, 1783, St. Petersburg).

At least two reasons might have contributed to the nineteenth-century European virtually avoidance of Passion Plays. One such reason was the general decrease of spiritual genres for the benefit of secular ones (although devotional oratorios depicting various periods of Jesus' life were created by Berlioz, Massenet, Liszt and other West-European composers); another reason could be a probable unwillingness to be seen as competing with Bach's masterpiece<sup>9</sup>. It would thus seem that Romantic revival of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* paradoxically inhibited the creation of other Romantic works of this kind. It is possible, though, that the Gospel story was implied by Tchaikovsky in the hidden program of his *Pathétique* symphony (1893) [18]. Textless instrumental music was the only way a nineteenth-century Russian composer could express his religious feelings; at that time, para-liturgical music did not exist in Russia, and the figure of Jesus could not appear on any theatrical stage. Even the play *The King of Judea*, written by the Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich Romanov in the 1880–1890's (under Tchaikovsky's influence) was censored and could only be performed for a limited court audience, at the Hermitage Theater, as late as 1913.

## Passion-opera

The performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was originally planned for Saint Paul's Cathedral, thus suggesting an oratorio-style performance, actually a Passion Play. In fact, it did not need to be staged nor filmed in order to receive its world recognition. The popularity was achieved by recordings: LPs and other audio media. Yet, it is defined and staged as an opera and constructed according to clear operatic rules. Its not-too-Gospel-

---

<sup>9</sup> In the twentieth century, however, when the modern style took strong root in music, the comparison to Bach lost its actuality and several works appeared in Germany, with its vital tradition of Passion Plays. Penderecki (who chose St Luke Passion in order to elude comparison with Bach) moreover, incorporated BACH notes in one of the tone rows.

like script and not-too-academic musical style have a more than two hundred years old precedent in Graun's oratorio *The Death of Jesus*. Ironically, the concert performance of Slonimsky's *The Master and Margarita* made it appear closer to the Passion-Play genre than to opera. This did not interfere with its dramatic power, since listeners could envision in their own minds the imagery of Bulgakov's novel.

One can find some stylistic features shared by Lloyd Webber's and Slonimsky's works. While Lloyd Webber introduced some avant-garde devices into his score (Walsh noted the influence of Ligeti and Penderecki, in "Crucifiction" [16, p. 70]), Slonimsky resorted to some rock-style techniques in his opera [2, p. 131]. Both used gallop and ragtime rhythms for scenes of mockery (Pilate, the mob and Herod in *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Woland's Ball in *The Master and Margarita*). Lastly, both delineated the female parts — Mary Magdalene and Margarita — as dominating full-blooded type of feminine personality whose love to their chosen men radiates compassion, support and devotion.

Popular or avant-garde, these works are Passion-Operas. They appeared when the general tendency to romanticize Jesus' image led them into the operatic scene, to which the genre of Passion had long aspired. Meanwhile, cinema has taken the initiative. The 1970s alone saw the production of thirteen films, including *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973, Norman Jewison), *Godspell* (1973, John-Michael Tebelak), as well as *Pilatus und Andere* (1972, Andrzej Wajda, based on Bulgakov's novel) and Yugoslavian/Italian *The Master and Margaret* (1972, Aleksandar Petrović). 1988 thundered with *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which significantly influenced later Passion-movies and Passion-novels.

The last thirty years that passed since 1987, are not lacking of Jesus appearances on stage. New films and numerous remakes of old ones, alongside originals that continue their public life, constitute a significant part of the modern repertoire. To mention only those based on Bulgakov's novel: *Mistrz i Malgorzata* (TV series, 1988, Maciej Wojtyszko), *Forradalom Után* (1990, Andras Szirtes), *Incident in Judea* (1992, Paul Bryers), *Master i Margarita* (1994, Yuri Kara), *Master i Margarita* (1996, Sergei Desnitsky), *Master i Margarita* (TV series, 2005, Vladimir Bortko), *A Mester és Margarita* (2005, Ibolya Fekete), *Il Maestro e Margherita* (2008, Giovanni Branciale), *The Master and Margarita* (2012, Scott Steindorff), *Master i Margarita* (animation film, 2012, Rinat Timerkaev).

New music spectacles offer their own takes of Jesus story, though increasingly in an indirect, even metaphorical ways. Fashionable gender studies and growing LGBT relationship legalization affect these new versions. For example, the influence of Hugh William Montefiore, Bishop of Kingston, who pointed at homoerotic aspects of the Gospel, can be easily traced in the scandalous and successful English *Jerry Springer: The Opera* (2003, Stewart Lee and Richard Thomas) [19]. The American band *Green Day's* rock-punk opera *American Idiot* (2004, lyrics by Billie Joe Armstrong, co-produced with Rob Cavallo) features a teenage called "Jesus of Suburbia" who sways between antiwar protests (during G. W. Bush's presidency) and the general aimlessness of his own life. This work examines a completely different socio-cultural phenomenon, where the "Idiot" is perceived as a metaphorical "Jesus", with obvious Dostoyevskian overtones. More recently, the narrative seems to attract the most prominent American composers. The opera-oratorio (subtitled "Passion-Oratorio") *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* (2012–2013, John Adams) tells the story of Mary of Bethany, Martha's and Lazarus' sister. Shortly thereafter and staged almost simultaneously, the neo-Romantic opera *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (2013, Mark Adamo) portrays Mary Magdalene as Jesus' wife. During the last few decades,

Susan Hulsman Bingham serves as the Chancel Opera Director at the Episcopal Church of the Mediator in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Her liturgical chancel operas according to the Gospel, are mainly aimed at performance with children choirs<sup>10</sup>.

Myth, when its time returns, develops in many versions. The plurality of generic and stylistic expressions, however, does not lessen its universality. By definition, the Passion Play is a genre that belongs to both mass and high cultures. Therefore, both styles — popular and avant-garde — have equal rights for Passion Plays presentations. It is at least since the 1960s that avant-garde and mass culture share a certain part of their audience [5, p. 195] and, consequently, also some of their socio-cultural characteristics, at least versus representational academism and “bourgeois” ideas of art [22, p. xiii].

Avant-garde, no matter how great the music, will never have a broad audience. Rock-opera, no matter how great, will never reach conservative opera houses. The myth of Jesus will always be a Passion. And, hopefully, it always will be open to other arts, including opera, with its immense expressive potential.

## References

1. Fink M. *Inside the Music Business*. New York, Schirmer Books Publ., 1989.
2. Ritsareva M. *Kompozitor Sergei Slonimsky*. Monograph. Leningrad, Sovetskiy kompozitor Publ., 1991.
3. Singer M. “Cinema Savior,” *Film Comment*, XXIV/5 (Sept.-Oct. 1988).
4. Hunter D. *The Beatles: The Authorized Biography*. New York, Del Publishing, 1969.
5. Mellers W. *The Music of the Beatles: Twilight of the Gods*. New York, Schirmer Books, 1973.
6. Milne L. *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.
7. Berger, Karol. *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow: an Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2007.
8. “Quest for the historical Jesus”. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quest\\_for\\_the\\_historical\\_Jesus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quest_for_the_historical_Jesus) (accessed: 26.01.2017).
9. Bruhn S. Jesus and Satan in Moscow: Three Late-20th-century Operas on Bulgakov's Novel. *JMM* 4, Winter 2007, section 2. Available at: <http://www.musicandmeaning.net/issues/showArticle.php?artID=4.2> (accessed: 28.01.2017).
10. Weaver W.P. *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century: 1900–1950*. Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, A&C Black Publ., 1999.
11. Sachs C. *The Commonwealth of Art: Style in the Fine Arts, Music and the Dance*. New York, W. W. Norton & co. Publ., 1946).
12. Corliss R. “Body... And Blood,” *Film Comment*. XXIV/5 (Sept.-Oct. 1988).
13. Bowker J. *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970.
14. Gilet P. *Vladimir Propp and the Universal Folktale: Recommissioning an Old Paradigm — Story as Initiation*. New York, Peter Lang Publ., 1998.
15. Eliade M. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Transl. by R. Trask Willard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.
16. Walsh M. A. *Andrew Lloyd Webber: His Life and Works*. London, Penguin Group, 1989.
17. *Sergei Slonimsky gotovitsya k ispolneniyu svoey opery “Master i Margarita”* [Sergei Slonimsky prepares to the performance of his opera Master i Margarita], 22.06.2012. Available at: <http://www.belcanto.ru/12062228.html> (accessed: 04.02.2017).
18. Ritzarev M. *Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture*. Ashgate, 2014.
19. H. W. Montefiore, “Jesus, the Revelation of God”. *Christ for Us Today: Papers read at the Conference of Modern Churchmen, Somerville College, Oxford, July 1967*. Ed. by N. Pittenger. London, SCM Press, 1968.
20. Bruhn S. *Christus als Opernheld*. Gorz, 2005.
21. Bruhn S. *Saints in the Limelight: Representations of the Religious Quest on the Post-1945 Operatic Stage*. Pendragon, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> For special research into twentieth-century operas on this topic see [20, 21].

22. Suárez J. A. *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*. Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996.

**For citation:** Ritzarev M. From the Cathedral to the Opera Stage. *Vestnik SPbSU. Arts*, 2017, vol. 7, issue 2, pp. 132–143. DOI: 10.21638/11701/spbu15.2017.201

Received: 01.02.2017

Accepted: 20.03.2017

#### Authors information

*Рыцарева Марина Григорьевна* — доктор искусствоведения, профессор; mritzarev@gmail.com

*Ritzarev Marina G.* — Dr. Hab., Professor; mritzarev@gmail.com